

# Bengal divided

*Hindu communalism and partition, 1932–1947*

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## Introduction

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When Curzon partitioned Bengal in 1905, this elicited a storm of protest which forced the government to rescind his decision within six years. Indeed, Bengal's reputation for being in the vanguard of Indian nationalism owes much to the agitation which upset the 'settled fact' of partition, and which introduced new techniques of mobilisation to Indian politics.<sup>1</sup>

In 1947, Bengal was partitioned again, following horrific clashes between Hindus and Muslims. On this occasion, however, hardly a voice was raised in protest. On the contrary, the second and definitive partition of Bengal was preceded by an organised agitation which demanded the vivisection of the province on the basis of religion. This movement was led by the very same section of Bengali society that had dominated its nationalist politics since the time of Bengal's first partition: the so-called *bhadralok* or 'respectable people'. In less than forty years, *bhadralok* politics had come full circle, moving away from nationalist agendas to more parochial concerns. The central purpose of this work will be to explain these changes in *bhadralok* politics and to interpret their apparent shift from 'nationalism' towards 'communalism'.<sup>2</sup>

The relationship between Indian nationalism and communalism is complex and ambivalent, both in terms of ideology and political practice. Recent studies have argued that nationalism in India cannot be regarded as the 'other' of communalism.<sup>3</sup> The opposite of communalism is secularism, which separates politics from religion.<sup>4</sup> Admittedly, many aspects of

<sup>1</sup> See Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903–1908*, New Delhi, 1973.

<sup>2</sup> The word 'communalism' is widely used in the Indian context to describe mutual hostility between communities based on religion.

<sup>3</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, New Delhi, 1990, pp. 2, 241. Also see Mushirul Hasan, *Nationalism and Communal Politics in India, 1885–1930*, New Delhi, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> For an early discussion of the term 'secularism', see G. J. Holyoake, *The Origin and Nature of Secularism*, London, 1896. Also see Bryan Wilson, *Religion in a Secular Society. A Sociological Comment*, London, 1966.

Indian nationalism were not in this sense secular:<sup>5</sup> nationalist campaigns often manipulated religious imagery and issues to win popular support.<sup>6</sup> Nor did Indian nationalism have truly secular ideological and philosophical underpinnings. Nationalist thought tended to share the colonial view that the basic unit of Indian society was the community as defined by religion.<sup>7</sup> The 'secular' nationalist ideal was *sarvadharmā sambhava*, that is, the equality of all communities and the spirit of accommodation between them.<sup>8</sup> Yet most nationalist thinkers tended to describe national identity in religious terms, and to equate being an Indian with being a Hindu. This was particularly marked in Bengal, in the writings of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Aurobindo Ghosh and Swami Vivekananda and in the brand of 'extremist' nationalism they inspired.<sup>9</sup>

But if nationalist thought was not truly secular, nor was it 'communal'. The main thrust of the national movement was directed against British colonialism. When it appealed to religion, it did so to mobilise religious sentiment against British rule. Communal parties and ideologies, on the other hand, always defined the community based on religion as a political unit in a permanent adversarial relationship with other communities. In theory, therefore, communal ideologists owed more to the colonial wisdom about India than the nationalist. Not only did they see India as a society dominated by communities, just as the colonial civil servants did,

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, the discussion of the relationship between religious and nationalist politics in India in Dumont's essay: 'Nationalism and Communalism', Appendix D, *Homo Hierarchicus. The Caste System and its Implications*, Chicago, 1980. Of course, this relationship was in no sense exclusively Indian, as Dumont suggests. On the role that religion has played in national and proto-national movements in western Europe, see John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, Manchester, 1985, pp. 45–50.

<sup>6</sup> Religious issues could, of course, serve other purposes, which had more to do with the interests of particular groups than with the nationalist cause. There is a large body of literature demonstrating these and other dimensions in the use of religion in nationalist politics. See, for instance, Barbara Southard, 'The Political Strategy of Aurobindo Ghosh. The Utilisation of Religious Symbols and the Problem of Political Mobilisation in Bengal', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 14, 1980, pp. 353–376; Anand Yang, 'Sacred Symbol and Sacred Space in Rural India, Community Mobilisation in the "Anti-Cow Killing" Riot of 1893', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 22, 1981; John R. McLane, 'The Early Congress, Hindu Populism and Wider Society', in R. Sisson and Stanley Wolpert (eds.), *The Congress and Indian Nationalism. The Pre-Independence Phase*, New Delhi, 1988.

<sup>7</sup> See Ravinder Kumar, 'Class, Community or Nation? Gandhi's Quest for a Popular Consensus in India', in his *Essays in the Social History of Modern India*, Calcutta, 1986.

<sup>8</sup> Prakash Chandra Upadhyaya, 'The Politics of Indian Secularism', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 26, 4, 1992, pp. 815–853.

<sup>9</sup> Partha Chatterjee, 'Transferring a Political Theory: Early Nationalist Thought in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 21, 3, 18 January 1986; Barbara Southard, 'The Political Strategy of Aurobindo Ghosh'; Swami Vivekananda (edited by Eknath Ranade), *Utthistat! Jagrat! Hindu Rashtra ka Amar Sandesh*, ('Arise! Awaken! The Immortal Message of the Hindu Nation'), Lucknow, 1972.

they also regarded the two main communities as being irreconcilably opposed to each other. It followed that communal parties were by no means necessarily hostile to the Raj and frequently enjoyed its patronage.<sup>10</sup>

It is in this sense that the idea of a shift from nationalism to communalism will be discussed in this study. It will concentrate upon the Hindu bhadralok of Bengal, who dominated nationalist politics in the province. These politics always had a narrow social base in Bengal, and support from the masses, even in the heyday of Gandhi's influence, was limited and sporadic.<sup>11</sup> Except for a brief interlude during the Khilafat agitation, the Muslims of Bengal, who were more than half the population of the province, shunned the movements led by the bhadralok. But despite being overwhelmingly bhadralok in character, the Bengal Congress remained a political force to be reckoned with until well into the 1920s, and during the first three decades of the twentieth century exerted a powerful influence over the mainstream of Indian nationalism.

But in the last decade and a half of British rule in India, Bengal lost its position of pre-eminence in all-India politics, and was edged out of the nationalist mainstream. During these years bhadralok politics tended to draw inwards, focusing increasingly upon narrow provincial concerns. Preoccupied as they were with defending their interests against challenges posed by other groups in Bengal society, the bhadralok perceived politics more and more in communal terms. The Hindu communal ideology which they now came to construct turned away from and inverted the nationalist tradition in subtle and interesting ways.

This book will look at these processes in the context of the changes in Bengali society and the position of the Hindu bhadralok within it. Although the term 'bhadralok' is widely used and well understood in Bengal, scholars outside it have come to use it in various and sometimes

<sup>10</sup> Jinnah and the Muslim League were given far greater significance than their electoral strength merited and were cultivated as a counterweight to the Congress at least until the end of the Second World War. See Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman. Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan*, Cambridge, 1985; and Anita Inder Singh, *The Origins of the Partition of India, 1936–1947*, New Delhi, 1987. In Bengal, as this study will try to show, British governors clearly preferred to deal with overtly communal organisations, such as the Hindu Mahasabha and the Muslim League, rather than with Congress or the Krishak Praja party. For their part, the Mahasabha and the League were careful to stay on the right side of the Raj; both parties, for instance, were active in the war effort of the 1940s, a point worth recalling today, when communal organisations which regard Shyamaprasad Mookerjee as a patron saint also claim to be 'true' nationalists.

<sup>11</sup> Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement*; Tanika Sarkar, *Bengal 1928–1934. The Politics of Protest*, New Delhi, 1987; Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Subhas Chandra Bose and Middle Class Radicalism. A Study in Indian Nationalism*, London, 1990.



contradictory ways. In the sixties, John Broomfield used it to describe a westernised caste elite, viewed as a Weberian status group;<sup>12</sup> the term was taken up by another historian to characterise the dominant 'upper crust of Bengali society' who enjoyed a 'despotism of caste, tempered by matriculation'.<sup>13</sup> More recently, the analysis of nationalist politics in terms of the grievances of the Presidency elites has come under critical scrutiny,<sup>14</sup> and with it the use of the term *bhadralok* has become suspect.<sup>15</sup> But the alternative term offered in its stead – 'the middle classes'<sup>16</sup> – is capable of being as misleading as the term it is intended to replace. Derived as it is from the study of western industrial societies, 'middle class' suggests essentially urban groups, consisting in the main of traders and entrepreneurs, and coming in due course, in advanced industrial societies, to include the salaried professionals.<sup>17</sup> Members of the *bhadralok* often chose to describe themselves in just this way, taking as their model the prosperous and influential middle classes of Victorian England.<sup>18</sup> But in so doing they, and historians after them, were drawing false analogies between society in Bengal and in Britain.

The basis of *bhadralok* prosperity was neither trade nor industry,<sup>19</sup> but

<sup>12</sup> J. H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society. Twentieth-Century Bengal*, Berkeley, 1968, pp. 5–14.

<sup>13</sup> Gordon Johnson, 'Partition, Agitation and Congress: Bengal 1904–1908', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 7, 3, 1973, pp. 534–535.

<sup>14</sup> For an account of the debates that have dogged this school of historiography, see Michelguglielmo Torri, '"Westernised Middle Class" Intellectuals and Society in Late Colonial India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 25, 4, 27 January 1990, pp. PE 2–11.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, the discussion of the term by Sumit Sarkar in *The Swadeshi Movement*, pp. 509–512.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, the use of the term 'middle class' to describe this social group by Himani Bannerji in 'The Mirror of Class: Class Subjectivity and Politics in 19th Century Bengal', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 24, 13, May 1989; and by Bidyut Chakrabarty in *Subhas Chandra Bose and Middle-Class Radicalism*.

<sup>17</sup> See Guglielmo Cardechi, *On the Economic Identification of Social Classes*, London, 1977; Nicos Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, London, 1975, and 'The New Petty Bourgeoisie' in Alan Hunt (ed.), *Class and Class Structure*, London, 1977; Anthony Giddens, *The Class Structure of Advanced Societies*, London, 1973; and Raymond Williams, *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, New York, 1976, 51–59.

<sup>18</sup> Surendranath Banerjee, for instance, described Bengal's 'new middle class' as the standard-bearer of 'enlightenment, freedom, progress and prosperity' in *The Bengalee*, 17 February 1921. Cited in Rajat Ray, 'Three Interpretations of Indian Nationalism', in B. R. Nanda (ed.), *Essays in Modern Indian History*, New Delhi, 1980, p. 1. For a discussion of Victorian influences on *bhadralok* culture and society, see Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets. Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth-Century Calcutta*, Calcutta, 1989, and Nilmani Mukherjee, 'A Charitable Effort in Bengal in the Nineteenth Century. The Uttarpara Hitkari Sabha', *Bengal Past and Present*, vol. 89, 1970, pp. 247–263.

<sup>19</sup> The few families which had amassed their fortunes as *dewans* and middle men of the East India Company were not able to reproduce their wealth by investing it profitably in trade or productive enterprise: most chose, instead, to buy up landed estates which, certainly by

land.<sup>20</sup> The Bengali bhadralok were essentially products of the system of property relations created by the Permanent Settlement. They were typically a rentier class who enjoyed intermediary tenurial rights to rents from the land. There were many differences within the bhadralok,<sup>21</sup> reflecting the variety in size and quality of their holdings in the land, and in part the result of subinfeudation and the proliferation of intermediary tenures.<sup>22</sup> But from the landed magnate down to the petty *talukdar*, this was a class that did not work its land but lived off the rental income it generated. The bhadralok gentleman was the antithesis of the horny-handed son of the soil. Shunning manual labour, the 'Babu' saw this as the essence of the social distance between himself and his social inferiors.<sup>23</sup> The title 'Babu' – a badge of bhadralok status – carried with it connotations of Hindu, frequently upper caste exclusiveness,<sup>24</sup> of landed wealth, of being master (as opposed to servant), and latterly of possessing the goods of education, culture and anglicisation.<sup>25</sup> The vernacular term

the beginning of the nineteenth century, promised to be a more secure and lucrative investment. See John McGuire, *The Making of a Colonial Mind. A Quantitative Study of the Bhadrakol in Calcutta, 1857–1885*, Canberra, 1983, pp. 1–20; S. N. Mukherjee, 'Caste, Class and Politics in Calcutta' in his *Calcutta: Myth and History*, Calcutta, 1977, p. 15; and Benoy Ghosh, 'Some Old Family-Founders in 18th Century Calcutta', *Bengal Past and Present*, vol. 79, 1960, pp. 42–55. As Sumit Sarkar has pointed out, 'a single Dwarkanath did not herald a bourgeois spring'. 'Rammohun Roy and the Break with the Past' in Sumit Sarkar, *A Critique of Colonial India*, Calcutta, 1985, p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the bhadralok shared (and largely continue to share) a contempt for traders and shopkeepers that reflects the social attitudes of a landed class.

<sup>21</sup> Sumit Sarkar has therefore remarked that 'the trouble with this term ... is that it is much too broad, ranging presumably from the Maharaja of Mymensingh to the East Indian railway clerk'. *The Swadeshi Movement*, p. 509.

<sup>22</sup> Subinfeudation was particularly marked in the districts of Eastern Bengal such as Bakarganj, where there were sometimes as many as fifteen intermediary tenure-holders between the zamindar and the *raiya*. Tapan Raychaudhuri, 'Permanent Settlement in Operation. Bakarganj District, East Bengal', in R. E. Frykenberg (ed.), *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History*, Madison, Wis., 1969, pp. 163–174. Not surprisingly, Bakarganj was a district that had a particularly high number of bhadralok Hindus.

<sup>23</sup> In Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Palli Samaj* ('Village Society'), for instance, Masima asserts her bhadralok status to the hero Ramesh with the declaration 'My father was not your father's *gomasta* (steward), nor was he a landless labourer who worked your father's private estate ... Ours is a bhadralok household'. Sukumar Sen (ed.), *Sulabh Sarat Samagra*, vol. II, Calcutta, 1989, p. 137.

<sup>24</sup> S. N. Mukherjee notes that the word 'babu', of Persian origin, was 'always used as a term of respect for Bengali Hindus of the higher orders'. 'Bhadralok in Bengali Language and Literature. An Essay on the Language of Caste and Status', *Bengal Past and Present*, vol. 181, 1976, p. 233.

<sup>25</sup> The dictionary definition of the word is interesting: 'a title affixed to the name of a gentleman; a proprietor; a master; an employer; an officer; a landlord ... given to luxury, daintiness, fastidiousness, foppishness, foppery, dandyism'. *Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary* (2nd edn), Calcutta, 1988. Mukherjee points out that to begin with, the word *babu* was used by the British as a respectful form of address to Hindu zamindars, and that it only acquired its disparaging connotations at the end of the nineteenth century.

'bhadralok' is useful not only because it expresses this sense of exclusiveness and the social relations that produced it, but also because it carries with it overtones of the colonial origins of this class and its overwhelmingly Hindu composition. Yet neither 'bhadralok' nor 'babu' describe straightforward communal or caste categories.<sup>26</sup> These terms reflected, instead, the social realities of colonial Bengal, the peculiar configuration that excluded, for a variety of historical reasons,<sup>27</sup> the vast majority of Bengali Muslims and low-caste Hindus from the benefits of land ownership and the particular privileges it provided.

Some bhadralok took enthusiastically to the new western education that was available from the early nineteenth century. This 'modern' intelligentsia was drawn, in the main, from the middle and lower echelons of the rent-receiving hierarchy, who recognised that western education was an avenue for advancement under their new rulers.<sup>28</sup> Most belonged to families that were traditionally literate, whose forebears, in another age, had worked as scribes at the Mughal and Nawabi courts, or had formed a part of the traditionally literate caste elite.<sup>29</sup> Some were recruited into the bureaucracy by which the British ruled Bengal, typically at the lower levels reserved for Indians. But even as they established themselves in Calcutta and the district towns, the western-educated bhadralok retained strong links with the countryside. Nirad Chaudhuri, son of a small-town pleader, describes his childhood at the turn of the century and the visits to the family's ancestral village during the Puja vacations

'Bhadralok in Bengali Language and Literature', pp. 233–235. Christine Baxter has argued that the first steps in this direction were taken in the 1820s, when Bhabanicharan Bannerji published his satirical essays portraying the 'babu' as a 'Persianized upstart'. The association with imitative anglicisation came later. Christine Baxter, 'The Genesis of the Babu: Bhabanicharan Bannerji and the *Kalikata Kamalalay*' in Peter Robb and David Taylor (eds.), *Rule, Protest, Identity. Aspects of Modern South Asia*, London, 1978.

<sup>26</sup> Many of the richest bhadralok families of Calcutta, such as the Seals and the Basaks, were drawn from the lower rungs of the caste ladder. S. N. Mukherjee, 'Caste, Class and Politics', p. 31.

<sup>27</sup> See Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal 1937–1947*, New Delhi, 1976, pp. 1–30; Jayanti Maitra, *Muslim Politics in Bengal 1885–1906. Collaboration and Confrontation*, Calcutta, 1984, pp. 9–44; and S. N. Mukherjee, 'Caste, Class and Politics'.

<sup>28</sup> 'Nobles' like Raja Peary Mohan Mookerjee found 'no charm in formal education. "They looked upon it in open scorn as a thing by which humbler people got their bread"'. P. C. Mahtab, 'Bengal Nobles in Politics: 1911–1919', *Bengal Past and Present*, vol. 92, 1973, pp. 23–36. An analysis made in 1871 of the annual report of the Director of Public Instruction of Bengal thus found that of the total number of 'upper and middle class' pupils in schools, those from the titled aristocracy formed only 0.97 per cent, while the overwhelming majority were sons of lesser land-holders and professionals. Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets*, pp. 215–216, n. 79.

<sup>29</sup> In Bengal, these literate castes included not only Brahmins, but also Kayasthas and Baidyas. Premen Addy and Ibne Azad, 'Politics and Culture in Bengal', *New Left Review*, vol. 79, May–June 1973; and S. N. Mukherjee, 'Caste, Class and Politics'.

and for family weddings.<sup>30</sup> He writes of the emotional bonds that linked town and country:

The ancestral village always seemed to be present in the mind of the grown-ups. Most of them had acquired extensive properties in [the town of] Kishoreganj. They had also acquired ... some sense of citizenship. Yet I hardly remember a single adult who thought of his Kishoreganj life as his whole life ... In our perception of duration Kishoreganj life was the ever-fleeting present, the past and the future belonged to the ancestral village ...<sup>31</sup>

This relationship between town and country found expression in the use of different words to describe the village home and the base in town. The town house was merely a *basha*, a temporary lodging, whereas the village was the *bari*, the home. The sense of belonging to the village was so strong that during Chaudhuri's childhood, 'neither child nor adult at Kishoreganj ever applied to his Kishoreganj house the Bengali equivalent of the word *home*'.<sup>32</sup>

The ancestral village home continued to be occupied by relatives, some of whom managed the family property, while others found employment as *naiibs* (accountants) and *amals* (revenue collectors) on neighbouring estates, or as tutors in zamindari schools.<sup>33</sup> By no means all branches of bhadralok families, even amongst those who had received a western education, settled in the towns and joined the professions or services. The Palchaudhuris of Mahesganj were a case in point. Of the two heirs to a large estate in Nadia, Nafar Chandra stayed in the *mofussil* (country), managed the family estates with the help of his *lathials* (servants), held court at the *kutcheri* (lower court), tended the family deities and ran a caste association. His brother Bipradas, on the other hand, graduated from Presidency College in Calcutta and went to England for higher education. On his return, he 'adopted western lifestyle', settled in Nadia

<sup>30</sup> Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, London, 1988, p. 48.

<sup>31</sup> Stressing the importance of the village, Chaudhuri writes that 'the feeling which our elders had of the relative importance of their existence at Kishoreganj and in their ancestral village cannot be described even by bringing in the parallel of the tree and its roots, a house and its foundations ... for even in these cases, the buried parts exist for the superficial, or at all events are not more important. The immensely greater importance of the absent life was of the very essence of the matter of our life at Kishoreganj placed against our life in the ancestral village'. *Ibid.*, pp. 49–50.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50. Also see S. N. Mukherjee, 'Caste, Class and Politics'.

<sup>33</sup> Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, pp. 58–59. It was not uncommon for educated young men to return from Calcutta to run the family estate. Rabindranath Tagore is only the most well-known example. Another well-known figure who, as a young man, spent several years managing his family zamindari was Surendra Mohan Ghosh, leading member of the Jugantar group of terrorists and latterly president of the Bengal Congress. Interview with Surendra Mohan Ghosh, Oral Transcript No. 301, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, (henceforth NMML).

town, joined the Congress and sat on the Nadia District Board for two decades.<sup>34</sup> While Bipradas fits easily into the familiar 'western-educated middle-class' model, Nafar Chandra's way of life was no less typical of what might be described as the 'mofussil' bhadralok.<sup>35</sup>

By no means all bhadralok families took readily to western education. Even in the later nineteenth century, many orthodox families continued to have a distrust of the new ideas that was only strengthened by the wild disregard for tradition displayed by the Young Bengal generation.<sup>36</sup> Western education was not in itself a guarantee of bhadralok status. Prafulla Chandra Ray's father was treated as a social outcaste when he returned from Presidency College to run the family estates in Jessore. Indeed, his 'modern' attitudes so offended local zamindari society that the more orthodox families boycotted the *shraddha* (funeral) ceremony of his deceased grandfather.<sup>37</sup> But the early resistance to western education did not survive into the twentieth century. The enthusiasm for English education showed a marked increase from the end of the nineteenth century,<sup>38</sup> a trend that reflected the realities of Empire. The need to master English, the language of power, was keenly felt by ambitious groups all over the sub-continent, and the Bengali bhadralok were no exception.<sup>39</sup> But there were other, more specific, pressures that encouraged the bha-

<sup>34</sup> Ratnalekha Ray, 'The Changing Fortunes of the Bengali Gentry under Colonial Rule – Pal Chaudhuris of Mahesganj, 1900–1950', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 21, 3, 1987, pp. 513–514. The two brothers Bipradas and Dwijadas in Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's later novel *Bipradas* are, similarly, typical of the country-based and the urban bhadralok respectively. Haripada Ghosh (ed.), *Sarat Rachana Samagra* (Collected Works of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay), Calcutta, 1989, vol. III.

<sup>35</sup> See the account of the lifestyle enjoyed by P. C. Ray's father as zamindar of Raruli. Prafulla Chandra Ray, *Life and Experiences of a Bengali Chemist*, Calcutta, 1932, pp. 8–12.

<sup>36</sup> P. C. Ray gives an amusing account of the horror with which the local Jessore gentry regarded the antics of the anglicised young men of Calcutta. *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 25.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24–25. Even for the anglicised urban bhadralok, moreover, the sense of family prestige continued to be bound up intimately with the land and the ancestral village. Nirad Chaudhuri thus recalls, 'As soon as we arrived at Banagram we became aware of blood, aware not only of its power to make us feel superior to other men, but also of its immeasurable capacity to bring men together ... At Kishoreganj, our genealogy, like every other boy's, stopped at the father. The story ended with the assertion that Nirad Chaudhuri was the son of Upendra Narayan Chaudhuri. Not so at Banagram. There not only did we know, but we repeated as a catechism: "Nirad Chaudhuri is the son of Upendra Narayan Chaudhuri, who is the son of Krishna Narayan Chaudhuri, who was the son of Lakshmi Narayan Chaudhuri, who was the son of Kirti Narayan Chaudhuri, who was the son of Chandra Narayan Chaudhuri, and so on, to the fourteenth generation".' *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, p. 51.

<sup>38</sup> Tapan Raychaudhuri, 'Permanent Settlement in Operation', p. 174.

<sup>39</sup> Bhabanicharan Bannerji in *Kalikata Kamalalay* justified the learning of English thus: 'The necessity of a practical, money-producing education is supported by the shastras. How

dralok to look ever more favourably on 'modern' education. The rentier economy of which they were the beneficiaries began to show signs of strain towards the end of the nineteenth century. Agrarian productivity began to stagnate and land reclamation slowed down, marking the onset of an economic recession.<sup>40</sup> The introduction in 1885 of legislation limiting zamindari powers made the collection of dues more difficult,<sup>41</sup> and rentier incomes began the long process of decline, both in real and absolute terms. In the circumstances, more and more bhadralok families began to see western education as a way of supplementing their incomes and maintaining their influence. In the same period, traditional vernacular education ceased to be an attractive prospect to many high-caste families who still retained an access to it. As Sumit Sarkar has pointed out, the learned persons of high caste who stuck to traditional education had begun to lose their standing and patronage as English education penetrated deeper into rural society at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>42</sup> The story of one village priest's tragic decline into poverty in Bibhutibhushan Banerji's *Pather Panchali* depicts the typical circumstances that forced an indigent traditional priesthood to turn to the new education for survival.<sup>43</sup>

As western education came to be the choice of most of the bhadralok who could afford it, the prestige attached to it derived not only from the access it offered to opportunities under the Raj, but also from the fact that

can a country be administered without a knowledge of the language of those who happen to be ruling it?' Cited in Christine Baxter, 'The Genesis of the Babu', p. 199. For details on the spread of English, see John R. McLane, *Indian Nationalism and the Early Congress*, Princeton, 1977, p. 4; Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest. Literary Study and British Rule in India*, New York, 1989; Tejaswini Niranjana, 'Translation, Colonialism and the Rise of English' in Svati Joshi (ed.), *Rethinking English. Essays in Literature, Language, History*, New Delhi, 1991; and Jasodhara Bagchi, 'Shakespeare in Loincloths: English Literature and the Early Nationalist Consciousness in Bengal' in Svati Joshi (ed.), *Rethinking English*.

<sup>40</sup> Rajat Datta, 'Agricultural Production, Social Participation and Domination in Late Eighteenth Century Bengal: Towards an Alternative Explanation', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 17, 1, 1989, p. 77.

<sup>41</sup> Rajat and Ratna Ray, 'Zamindars and Jotedars: a Study of Rural Politics in Bengal', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 9, 1, 1975, p. 99.

<sup>42</sup> Sumit Sarkar, 'The Kalki-Avatar of Bikrampur: A Village Scandal in Early Twentieth Century Bengal', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies VI*, New Delhi, 1989, p. 15. For further discussion of the theme of the 'indigent Brahmin', see Sarkar's mimeograph, 'The Kathamrita as Text', NMML, Occasional Papers in History and Society, no. 22, 1985.

<sup>43</sup> Bibhutibhushan Banerji, *Pather Panchali* ('Song of the Road'), Calcutta, 1929. Banerji's own experiences followed a pattern similar to those of his boy hero, Apu. Born into a line of village doctors, Banerji's father, like Harihar Ray, earned a precarious living as a family priest. With great difficulty, he educated his son Bibhutibhushan at an English-medium High School. Banerji later went on to graduate with honours from Ripon College in Calcutta, and served variously as a teacher and clerk. See T. W. Clark's 'Introduction' to the English translation of the novel. *Song of the Road* (translated by T. W. Clark and Tarapada Mukherji), New Delhi, 1990, p. 11.

it was still the preserve of the privileged. Western secondary schools and colleges were overwhelmingly dominated by Hindu bhadralok students from families who could afford to pay the price of a protracted and expensive education and of lodgings in far away towns and cities.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the type of education that became fashionable among the bhadralok reflected not only the needs of the colonial administration but also the attitudes and aspirations of a landed and leisured class. Rammohun Roy's emphasis on practical training and the 'useful sciences' notwithstanding,<sup>45</sup> the choice of Bengal's students was a literary and humanist education,<sup>46</sup> so much so that efforts by an administration worried by the phenomenon of white-collar unemployment to give a more vocational and technological basis to higher education met with angry protests.<sup>47</sup> Such professional education as became popular among the bhadralok, notably in law and medicine, involved long years of training and the prospect of many more years of hardship until professional reputations were established, and inevitably depended upon generous financial support from well-to-do parents. It was thus inherited, typically landed, wealth that under-wrote bhadralok success in education and the professions, and ensured their dominance in these arenas. As bhadralok Hindus came to regard western education as their preserve, they vigorously resisted efforts to broaden the base of a top-heavy educational system, since opening the gates to the lesser sort would undermine its exclusiveness.<sup>48</sup>

Western education was thus a new way of maintaining old pre-eminences in Bengali society at a time when rentierism, the traditional mainstay of the bhadralok, had become less rewarding. In the same period, education became the vehicle by which the bhadralok constructed a new self-image. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, bhadralok authors came to describe their class more and more frequently as the *shikhhita sampraday* (educated community) or as the *shikhhita madhyabitta* (educated middle class) rather than the 'bhadralok', with its conno-

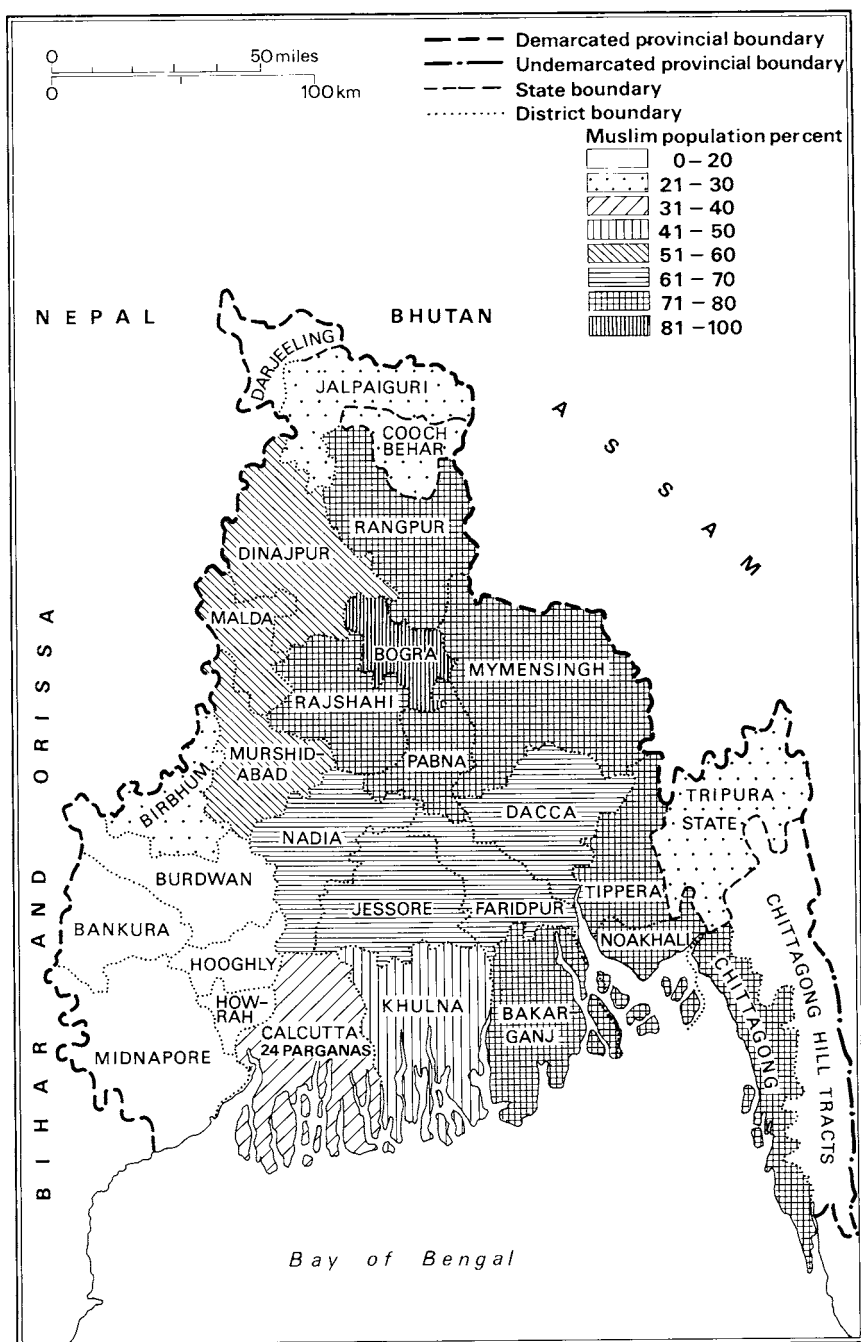
<sup>44</sup> In 1901, Hindus constituted 94 per cent of all students in Arts Colleges, 96.2 per cent of those in professional colleges and 88 per cent of those in high schools. Tazeem M. Murshid, 'The Bengali Muslim Intelligentsia, 1937-77. The Tension between the Religious and the Secular', University of Oxford, D.Phil thesis, 1985, p. 43. Also see Murshid's discussion of the costs and difficulties in securing a western education.

<sup>45</sup> S. D. Collet, *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy*, Calcutta, 1962, p. 458.

<sup>46</sup> Himani Bannerji, 'The Mirror of Class', p. 1046. Bannerji's discussion of Tagore's 'Rousseauesque/Reynoldsian' romantic vision of primary education and of his famous Bengali primer *Sahaj Path* ('Simple Lessons') is particularly revealing in this regard. Also see Jasodhara Bagchi, 'Shakespeare in Loincloths'.

<sup>47</sup> Archana Mandal, 'The Ideology and Interests of the Bengali Intelligentsia: Sir George Campbell's Education Policy (1871-1874)', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 12, 1, 1975, pp. 81-98.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81-89.



Map 2. Distribution of Muslim population, by district. *Number of Muslims per hundred of the total population, Census of 1931*